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**Robin George Collingwood's Philosophical  
 Influence on Eugenio Coseriu's Hermeneutical Conception**

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**Abstract:** R.G. Collingwood is an English philosopher and historian who is referred to by Coseriu a few times, mainly when the latter mentions the way in which history has to be interpreted. Despite the relatively few references, we are entitled to believe (and this is what we try to prove here) that Collingwood's influence on Coseriu was greater than assumed, at least by the fact he confirms – through the ideas found in his books – a series of Coseriu's intuitions and principles. In this paper, I will mainly consider Collingwood's influence on Coseriu as regards his hermeneutical conception.

**Keywords:** E. Coseriu; R. G. Collingwood; history; philosophy of language; hermeneutics

**1.** The topic chosen by me may surprise even some specialists in Coseriu's theory, since the name of Collingwood (unlike Aristotle's, for example) is rarely mentioned by the Romanian scholar. If one thoroughly reads, for instance, the series of ten volumes of Coserian essential studies, published by the Gredos House from Madrid (between 1962 and 1992), he will notice that the name of Collingwood is not mentioned at all. Only in some materials (initially, either conferences or courses) published by Coseriu in German does he find this English philosopher indicated. However, it seems that in some texts/discourses elaborated by Coseriu in Romanian, Collingwood is given a special emphasis (Munteanu, 2013, pp. 442-460).

**2.** The term *influence*, as used in the title of this paper, should be taken in a broad sense, because – leaving apart the elements the Romanian scholar obviously owes to the British philosopher – in some regards, Collingwood's influence on Coseriu can be reduced to the confirmation or the reconfirmation of some ideas which the Romanian linguists previously acquired from other philosophers or, on the contrary, found them on his own. Consequently, in this paper, I will take into consideration both sure and probable influences.

**3.** Undoubtedly, Coseriu's *Geschichte der Sprachphilosophie (History of the Philosophy of Language)* offers us the occasion of observing the particular way in which the Romanian scholar used to write the history of the philosophy of language. Coseriu's conception concerning the way in which the texts of

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the great thinkers should be read is convincing, useful and illuminating. Reading those old texts is seen by Coseriu as a *sui generis* hermeneutical process.

**3.1.** Indeed, Eugenio Coseriu stated – in an interview given to Eugen Munteanu in 1992 – that the way in which we read the works of such philosophical masters involves an identification with the interpreted author and, at the same time, a dissociation from the latter, since, for instance, understanding Plato from the insight of his theory, we do not forget that we are not, actually, Plato, but another conscience. Accordingly, the hermeneutical act is also a creative one, for we do not repeat (in a parrot-like manner) Plato's ideas: "This hermeneutics is always an identification with the interpreted author, but also a separation. The most difficult thing is to remain an interpreter yourself, but also to be able to assume the other's entire personality and his conditions, in order to understand his point of view and still remain outside (the author's mind); so as not to totally identify with him, because, in that case, you do not interpret, but you say it again, you only repeat it. Complete identification no longer means interpretation. If I identified myself with Plato, then I would say the same thing as Plato, without proving that I understood him; while all I have to do when interpreting is to be able to understand Plato from his perspective and, at the same time, to realize that I represent another point of view. (...) Thus, you need to have a perspective of your own, but also to get access to the interpretation from within." (Coşeriu, 1992, p. 7).

**3.2.** It is not difficult to find the source of this opinion. It is represented, first of all, by R.G. Collingwood's (a reputed English professor of metaphysics and history, who taught, during the interwar period, at the University of Oxford) works on the philosophy of history. According to Collingwood, history overlaps the history of thoughts of the people who acted before us, and the historian's mission is to re-enact these thoughts in his own mind and within his own frame of knowledge. "The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind. (...) The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, form his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it." (Collingwood, 1956, p. 215).

**3.2.1.** On many occasions, Coseriu confesses that he is tributary to the British philosopher as regards the interpretation of historical processes in general. For instance, when explaining how linguistic change occurs, the Romanian scholar also refers to the way in which this is to be analyzed: "We interpret how this fact happened in this state of things, that is, in this context. Otherwise, we would not understand anything. In order to understand, we should not only know, for example, that the Roman Senate loses the battle against the imperial tendencies – which can be noticed at Caesar and even earlier at Marius – , but we should also understand the state of things in which Caesar, as opposed to the Senate, is assassinated by the representatives of the Senate, including Brutus. To better understand, we have to think – as Collingwood, an English philosopher, would say – that the question is: why me, being Brutus, in this state of things, in this historical context, would have killed Caesar, would have considered it necessary to kill Caesar? Therefore, the historical interpretation is precisely re-enactment, knowing, of course, the facts that happened later. And, thus, re-enactment explains this previous state of things." (Coşeriu, 1996, p. 82).

The earliest mention of Collingwood, which I found in connection with this issue, dates back to 1979, and was included in Coseriu's speech pronounced before the Norwegian Academy, suggestively entitled *Humanwissenschaften und Geschichte. Der Gesichtspunkt eines Linguisten* (Coseriu, 1979/1988, p. 105). One would have expected that in the interview-book edited by J. Kabatek and A. Murguía (richer in information than the Romanian similar one, edited by Nicolae Saramandu, to which I have just referred) «*Die Sachen sagen, wie sie sind...*». *Eugenio Coseriu im Gespräch*, the Romanian scholar to

have mentioned Collingwood, too. Indeed, after a brief reference to Caesar's assassination without mentioning Collingwood ("Wäre die Geschichte anders gewesen, wenn Brutus Caesar nicht getötet hätte? Nein! – Warum? Weil er ihn getötet hat" (Coseriu, 1997, p. 50)), Coseriu explicitly refers to Collingwood and to the way the latter interprets history (in *The Idea of History*) starting from the example of "Brutus – Caesar" relationship (Coseriu, 1997, p. 179).

Anyway, when addressing to the Romanian public, Coseriu felt the need to give further explanations also because in our scientific environment (even among historians) Collingwood was almost unknown. Here is another proof, extracted from a conference delivered in Iași: "So, in reality, we always interpret ourselves to the extent in which, based on the fundamental alterity of humans, we are able to assume the others' personality, way of thinking, even from totally different and distant times. Collingwood – an English philosopher whom I highly appreciate from many points of view, as well as because of his particular biography – states, in an extraordinary book, written precisely about the essence of history, that, in reality, when wondering why Brutus killed Caesar, we actually ask ourselves why me, in Brutus' situation and in those historical circumstances, would have killed Caesar. And he does not say that a historian must present the problem that way, but this is how it *is* actually *presented*, even when the historian believes that he presents the problem objectively in relation to Brutus only. In order to present the problem in a serious manner, he has to reconstruct that historical situation, to place himself in that historical situation. So, this is how we proceed in linguistics, as well, when asking ourselves about facts from the past and when studying the so-called linguistic change, i.e., the facts created in language and which later become objective in a linguistic community. Similarly, in reality we ask ourselves: why me, in these historical circumstances, would have adopted this new (linguistic) form, for example, for the future tense of the verbs in Latin or in the so-called Vulgar Latin." (Coșeriu, 1993/2008, p. 22).

**3.2.2.** Here is the same question at Collingwood himself: "When he (= the historian) knows what happened, he already knows why it happened. This does not mean that words like «cause» are necessarily out of place in reference to history; it only means that they are used there in a special sense. When a scientist asks «Why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?» he means «On what kinds of occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink?». When a historian asks «Why did Brutus stab Caesar?» he means «What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?»." (Collingwood, 1956, p. 214).

The history of philosophy is also subject to the same requirements of history, according to Collingwood. That is why, not by chance, he judges in the same way, using the same logic of questions (Collingwood, 2013, pp. 29-43) when envisaging a great personality such as Plato: "But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself. This, in fact, is what we mean when we speak of «understanding» the words." (Collingwood, 1956, p. 215).

**3.3.** As already mentioned, Coseriu is indebted to Collingwood, both as regards history (as science) and the manner of reading his forerunners (as hermeneutics). Even some of his examples – that with Brutus and that with Plato – are also borrowed from the English philosopher. This does not mean that E. Coseriu takes Collingwood's conception as such. Coseriu's vision on history is much more complex, since it is influenced by an entire philosophical "family", including Hegel and Croce (the latter was one of Collingwood's friends and had a strong influence on him; moreover, both had a great interest in Vico). Such is the case of hermeneutics, since E. Coseriu surpasses Collingwood, on the one hand, (i) by

emphasizing the creative dimension of interpretation, as well, and, on the other hand, (ii) by incorporating the respective hermeneutics in a text linguistics that is marked by his originality.

Since the '70s (see his *Textlinguistik*, published in 1980<sup>1</sup>), Coseriu founded a text linguistics understood as a hermeneutics of sense, the Romanian scholar's interest focusing on literary works, for the artistic literature is the place of the functional plenitude of language. Coseriu did not exclude from the sphere of his text linguistics the other types of texts (i.e., the non-artistic ones); that is why, in other contributions, he also dealt with the essence of the religious text, of the historical text, of the journalistic (or informative) text, of the political text etc. However, it is true that the field of literature was the most interesting to him (apart from his passion for aesthetics), since it was the most challenging for interpretation/hermeneutics.

Coming back to philosophical texts, one can remark that – *mutatis mutandis* – Coseriu's statements concerning the study of political texts (in his conference *Lenguaje y política*) are also valid for the research of the former type of texts. Consequently, philosophical texts can be studied from three different perspectives: (a) as any other text, from a philological point of view, namely as documents, as sources of historical or/and cultural information etc., including the philosophical conceptions; (b) as typical examples of apophantic discourses (cf. Aristotle's *logos apophantikos*), within the frame of general text linguistics, aiming at identifying the procedures specific to this class of discourses (whose finality is to establish the truth or the falsity, the existence or the non-existence of the facts under discussion/study); (c) "individually, within the so-called «stylistics of speech» or, more exactly, of a text linguistics as textual hermeneutics at the level of «sense»" (Coseriu, 1987/2006, pp. 42-43; my translation, Cr.M.).

4. By way of conclusion, I think it is worth mentioning, in this context, Coseriu's opinion on difficult philosophical texts, which raise interpretation problems. In this regard, he learnt the principle theorized by Giovanni Gentile, an important Italian pedagogue and philosopher, according to whom more is understood from a difficult text, which forces learning to progress, than from a simple text, in which, in fact, one can find what he already knows (see, among others, Coşeriu, 2004, p. 103). As a matter of fact, G. Gentile's rival, Benedetto Croce (whom Coseriu appreciated more) had the same opinion (Munteanu, 2016, p. 82). May Collingwood have been influenced by Gentile (and by Croce) in this case, too? May this be because of their common *forma mentis*? Now, with reference to "obscure (historical) topics" in general (and not regarding texts, necessarily), the English philosopher proves that he shared a similar conception: "In this sense, knowledge advances by proceeding not 'from the known to the unknown', but from the 'unknown' to the 'known'. Obscure subjects, by forcing us to think harder and more systematically, sharpen our wits and thus enable us to dispel the fog of prejudice and superstition in which our minds are often wrapped when we think about what is familiar to us." (Collingwood, 2013, p. 86).

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<sup>1</sup> The respective book reproduces, in a version edited by J. Albrecht, the course which Coseriu delivered at the University of Tübingen in 1977-1978. The scholar stated that, broadly speaking, he had shaped his aesthetical conception starting with his Italian period (1940-1950), and later (between 1960 and 1962) taught elements of text linguistics at the University of Montevideo.

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